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TAGS: [EAIR](#) [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: Assistance for Afghanistan's Provincial Airports

¶1. (U) Summary: Antiquated and overcrowded, Afghanistan's provincial airports are struggling to handle existing passenger traffic and unable to handle increasing demand for international and domestic flights. Embassy Kabul is upgrading three provincial runways in cooperation with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Afghan Ministry of Finance. The FAA is seeking an additional \$448 million in USAID funding to improve four domestic airports and modernize the air traffic system to better connect provincial and international facilities. With just two airports suitable for international flights and crowding at the country's main airport in Kabul, Afghanistan needs increased donor support to enhance its air terminal infrastructure. We will continue to consult with other donors on this issue and believe airports, along with other key infrastructure projects such as the East West Highway, could be a worthwhile agenda item for Washington's discussions with other donor capitals. End Summary.

SOME UPGRADES ALREADY UNDERWAY...

¶2. (U) Most domestic air traffic in Afghanistan is private or government/military, and the majority of airports and air fields are adjacent to or part of coalition military facilities. However, the domestic civil market is growing, with two privately-owned commercial carriers, Pamir and KamAir, and government-owned Ariana, plying domestic routes with both turboprop and jet aircraft. Road conditions have dramatically improved since 2001 with billions of dollars in donor funding, but security along roads prevents many Afghans from driving long distances, making air travel an attractive and affordable option.

¶3. (U) ADB allocated \$30 million for a four-year improvement project at four airports, Chaghcharan, Qalai-Naw, Faizabad and Maimana, focused on non-runway projects. The project also includes capacity building at the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation (MOTCA). In addition to ADB's renovations, USAID committed \$6 million to concurrently upgrade runways at three of the four airports, excluding Qalai-Naw (Faizabad currently has a corrugated iron runway). The runway upgrades will allow C-130 and comparable aircraft to land, creating more opportunities for civil and military flights. USAID's funding covers half the cost of the upgrades and was provided on the condition the Afghan Government would match it. Minister of Finance Zakhilwal has said the Government would match the funding.

...WHILE MORE NEED FUNDING

¶4. (U) The country's largest provincial airports - Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz, Jalalabad and Kandahar - were built with U.S. assistance in 1956. While adequate for their time and fairly well-maintained, passenger traffic has outstripped the facilities. Herat airport was designed for 50 to 60 passengers per day, but now handles 600 to 700. Three hundred commercial passengers per day arrive and depart at Kandahar, whose combined military/civilian single runway is one of the busiest in the world.

¶5. (U) Herat has a single runway and no taxiway. A NATO-funded

expansion of the existing runway is underway. While MOTCA officials said they would like a new runway constructed, a Drug Enforcement Administration compound has been built nearby, possibly blocking its construction. Herat likely has passenger numbers to justify direct flights to Dubai. However, the runway is not long enough to accommodate aircraft capable of the trip, and Dubai only accepts Afghan flights from airports with contracted screeners employed by Global, a UK firm. At present, Global, whose contract is funded by the government of the United Arab Emirates, only operates in Kabul and Kandahar.

¶6. (U) During a visit to Herat and Kandahar airports in early February, FAA Acting Deputy Administrator David Grizzle evaluated staff capacity at the existing airports. Beyond general cleaning, very little preventative maintenance takes place at either facility.

Kandahar has an unfixed hole in its roof, and when a screening machine at Herat broke, airport staff relied on the adjacent Italian military facility to fix it. Specialized staff, such as firefighters, must be trained in Kabul. Grizzle emphasized that any renovation project at either airport should focus on capacity building and sustainable infrastructure that airport staff could maintain. The FAA has requested USAID funding to renovate facilities and train airport staff at Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Kabul airports. USAID is presently seeking additional infrastructure funds for ongoing projects, including urban infrastructure, natural gas-fueled power plants and multi-purpose dams, and will carefully consider this request along with other competing priorities.

¶7. (U) Comment: Civil aviation is one of Afghanistan's healthier industries, and as incomes continue to increase, more Afghans will fly domestically and internationally. Kabul International Airport (KIA), the country's largest, is nearing its structural air traffic limits unless it is significantly expanded. Japan funded a new international terminal at KIA but has no immediate plans for further aviation support. Germany spent \$12 million to repair and lengthen the runway at Mazar-i-Sharif to enhance logistical support for its troops. Civil operations at provincial airports attract fewer donors. Afghanistan's provincial airports need upgrading to help expand the nascent domestic and international markets. End comment.

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